

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Vayeishev

Genesis 37:1–40:23

Torah Reading for Week of December 14-20, 2003

"And Jacob settled," begins the Parshah of Vayeishev, "in the land of his father's dwelling, in the Land of Canaan."

His Charan years were behind him, with Laban many miles away on the other side of a pile of stones attesting to a non-aggression pact between them. A truce of sorts had been made with Esau. Dinah had been rescued and avenged, and his beloved Rachel had been buried and mourned.

The 100-year-old Patriarch now hoped that he had experienced enough hardship and heartbreak for a lifetime, and looked forward to some tranquil years in "the land of his father's dwelling" (Hebron) as his sons shepherded his flocks in the hills and valleys of Canaan.

But this was not to be.

Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a many-colored coat.

And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Matters were not helped by the fact that Joseph preferred the company of the children of Bilhah and Zilpah—whom Leah's sons regarded as their inferiors because they were the "sons of the handmaids"—and that he was constantly bringing his father critical reports of his brothers' behavior.

Commentary

AND JACOB SETTLED... (GENESIS 37:1)

Jacob desired to settle in tranquility, but it pounced upon him the agony of Joseph. For when the righteous wish to settle in tranquility, G-d says: "Is it not enough for the righteous what is prepared for them in the World to Come, that they also ask for a tranquil life in this world?"

(Rashi)

THESE ARE THE GENERATIONS OF JACOB: JOSEPH BEING SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD... (37:2)

Should not have the verse said, "These are the generations of Jacob: Reuben, etc."? Why Joseph?

Because everything that happened to Jacob, happened to Joseph. As Jacob was born circumcised, so was Joseph born circumcised; as Jacob's mother was infertile, so was Joseph's mother infertile; as Jacob's mother had difficulty in childbirth, so did Joseph's mother have difficulty in childbirth; as Jacob's mother bore two sons, so did Joseph's mother bear two sons; as Jacob was hated by his brother, so was Joseph hated by his brothers; as Jacob's brother sought to kill him, so did Joseph's brothers seek to kill him.

Jacob was a shepherd and Joseph was a shepherd, Jacob was persecuted, and Joseph was persecuted; Jacob was blessed with ten blessings and Joseph was blessed with ten blessings; Jacob was exiled from the Holy Land, and Joseph was exiled from the Land; Jacob took a wife outside the Land, and Joseph took a wife outside the Land; Jacob begot children outside the Land, and Joseph begot children outside the Land; Jacob was escorted by angels, and Joseph was escorted by angels; Jacob was made great through a dream, and Joseph was made great through a dream; the house of Jacob's father-in-law was blessed on his account, and the house of Joseph's father-in-law was blessed on his account; Jacob went down to

Egypt and Joseph went down to Egypt; Jacob ended the famine and Joseph ended the famine; Jacob adjured [his children] and Joseph adjured [his brothers]; Jacob charged [his children] and Joseph charged [his brothers]; Jacob died in Egypt and Joseph died in Egypt; Jacob was embalmed and Joseph was embalmed; the bones of Jacob were brought up [from Egypt to the Holy Land], and the bones of Joseph were brought up [from Egypt to the Holy Land]...

Jacob fathered Tribes, and Joseph fathered Tribes; Jacob was lost to his father for 22 years, and Joseph was lost to his father for 22 years; Jacob was indentured on account of a woman, and Joseph was imprisoned on account of a woman; Jacob supported Joseph for 17 years, and Joseph supported Jacob for 17 years...

(Midrash Rabbah; Zohar; et al)

AND JOSEPH BROUGHT TO HIS FATHER THEIR EVIL REPORT (37:2)

Said the sages: two righteous men were punished on account of the bearing of malevolent reports: Jacob and Joseph. Because Joseph spoke evilly of his brothers, he was incarcerated in prison for 12 years; and because Jacob listened to these reports, the Divine spirit departed from him for 22 years. This teaches us that one who speaks negatively of another is punished once, while someone who listens to negative talk of another is twice punished.

(Pirkei d'Rabbeinu HaKadosh)

ISRAEL LOVED JOSEPH THAN ALL HIS CHILDREN... AND HIS BROTHERS ENVIED HIM (37:3, 11)

"Love is strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6)—this is the love with which Jacob loved Joseph... "Envy is harsh as the grave" (ibid.)—this is the envy of the brothers to Joseph. What can love achieve in face of envy?y?

(Midrash Tanchuma)

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And Joseph had dreams.

Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brothers... "Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and bowed down to my sheaf."

And his brothers said to him: "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brothers: "...Behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me."

His father rebuked him: "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow down ourselves to you to the earth?" But Jacob said this only to diffuse the jealousy between the brothers, while "keeping the matter in mind."

The Sale of Joseph

Jacob sends Joseph to check up on his brothers, who have gone north with the flocks. Joseph finally locates them in Dotan, near Shechem.

And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him.

And they said, a man to his brother, "Behold, here comes the dreamer..."

"Let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, 'An evil beast has devoured him'; and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

But Reuben, the eldest of the brothers, says to them: "Let us not kill him... Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him." Reuben said this, attests the Torah, "so that he might save him out of their hands, to deliver him back to his father."

Commentary

Said Resh Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah: A man must not discriminate among his children, for on account of the coat of many colors which our father Jacob made for Joseph, "They hated him..."

(Midrash Rabbah)

A MANY-COLORED COAT (37:3)

Ketonet passim, in the Hebrew. The word *passim* can be translated as "colorful" (Radak; Septuagint), "embroidered" (Ibn Ezra; Bachya; Nachmanides on Exodus 28:2), "striped" (Ibn Janach; Radak, Sherashim), or "illustrated" (Targum Yonathan). It can also denote a long garment, coming down to the "palms" of the hands (Rashbam; Ibn Ezra; Baaley Tosafoth; Midrash Rabbah), and the feet (Lekach Tov). Alternatively, the word denotes the material out of which the coat was made, which was fine wool (Rashi) or silk (Ibn Janach). Hence, *Ketonet passim*, may be translated as "a full-sleeved robe," "a coat of many colors," "a coat reaching to his feet," "an ornamented tunic," "a silk robe," or "a fine woolen cloak."

(The Living Torah)

AND THEY COULD NOT SPEAK PEACEABLY TO HIM (37:4)

From what is stated to their discredit we may infer something to their credit: they did not speak one thing with their mouth having another thing quite different in their hearts.

(Rashi)

JOSEPH DREAMED A DREAM, AND TOLD IT TO HIS BROTHERS... "BEHOLD, WE WERE BINDING SHEAVES IN THE FIELD, AND, LO, MY SHEAF AROSE, AND

ALSO STOOD UPRIGHT; AND, BEHOLD, YOUR SHEAVES STOOD ROUND ABOUT, AND BOWED DOWN TO MY SHEAF." (37:5-7).

We live in a disjointed and fragmented world. Its countless components each seem to be going its own way, each creation seeking only its own preservation and advancement. Our own lives include countless events and experiences, espousing different priorities, pulling us in different directions.

But this is but the most superficial face of reality. The deeper we probe nature and its laws, the we uncover an underlying unity. The we assimilate the lessons of life, the we discern a "guiding hand" and a coherent destiny. The we utilize our talents and resources, all the do the various aspects of our uniquely individual role fall in place.

This is the deeper significance of Joseph's dream. We are all bundlers in the field of life. Here, each stalk grows in its own distinct little furrow; our challenge is to bring focus to this diversity, to gather these stalks together and bind them as a single sheaf.

But this alone is not enough. As Joseph saw in his dream, his brothers' individual bundles stood in a circle and bowed to his. This means that while every individual should view the various components of his life as a distinct "bundle," the piecing together of his life is not an end in itself, but the means to a higher goal. In the words of our sages, "The entire world was created only for my sake; and I was created only to serve my Creator." So while every person should view his entire world—the resources and opportunities which Divine Providence has sent his way—as being there for *him*, this "bundle" must in turn be dedicated to the fulfillment of his Divinely ordained mission in life.

The way this is achieved is by subjugating one's own bundle to

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And it came to pass, when Joseph was come to his brethren, that they stripped Joseph of his coat, the many-colored coat that was on him. And they took him, and cast him into a pit; and the pit was empty; there was no water in it.

And they sat down to eat bread. And they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilad with their camels bearing gum balm and laudanum, going to carry it down to Egypt.

And Judah said to his brothers: "What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh."

Reuben was not there when Judah proposed that Joseph be sold; when he comes back, intending to rescue Joseph, he finds the pit empty. He berates his brothers, but the deed has already been done; now they must find a way to explain Joseph's disappearance to their father.

They dip Joseph's coat in the blood of a goat, and bring it to their father. "This we have found," they say.

And he recognized it and said, "It is my son's coat; an evil beast has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn in pieces." And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, "For I will go down to the grave mourning my son."

Commentary

"Joseph's bundle." The Torah is G-d's communication of His will to man, and charts the course for man to serve his Creator. And each generation has its "Joseph," an utterly righteous individual whose life is the perfect embodiment of Torah's ethos and ideals. This is the *tzaddik* whom the "bundles" of the various tribes of Israel surround and subjugate themselves to, turning to him for guidance as how best to realize the purpose of their lives.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

SO HE SENT HIM OUT OF THE VALE OF HEBRON, AND HE CAME TO SHECHEM (37:14)

A place predestined for evil: in Shechem Dinah was violated; in Shechem Joseph was sold by his brothers; and in Shechem the kingdom of the House of David was divided (I Kings:12:1).

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 102a)

A MAN FOUND HIM WANDERING IN THE FIELD; AND THE MAN ASKED HIM, SAYING: "WHAT DO YOU SEEK?" AND HE SAID: "I SEEK MY BROTHERS; TELL ME, I PRAY YOU, WHERE THEY FEED THEIR FLOCKS." AND THE MAN SAID: "THEY ARE DEPARTED FROM HERE; FOR I HEARD THEM SAY, 'LET US GO TO DOTAN.'" AND JOSEPH WENT AFTER HIS BROTHERS, AND FOUND THEM IN DOTAN. (37:15-17)

"The man" was the angel Gabriel.

(Midrash; Rashi)

AND THEY SAID, A MAN TO HIS BROTHER (37:19)

Who were they? Shimon and Levi.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

AND REUBEN HEARD IT, AND HE DELIVERED HIM OUT OF THEIR HANDS (37:21)

Had Reuben known that the Torah would write of him, "And Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands," he would have loaded Joseph on his shoulders and carried him back to his father.

(Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 34:9)

AND THEY TOOK HIM, AND CAST HIM INTO A PIT; AND THE PIT WAS EMPTY; THERE WAS NO WATER IN IT (37:24)

From the implication of what is said, "And the pit was empty," do I not know that there was no water in it? What then is taught by, "there was no water in it"? There was no water, but there were snakes and scorpions in it.

(Talmud, Shabbat 22a)

The mind and heart of man are never empty. If there is no life-nourishing "water," there are "snakes and scorpions in it"

(The Chassidic Masters)

AND REUBEN RETURNED TO THE PIT; AND, BEHOLD, JOSEPH WAS NOT IN THE PIT (37:29)

Where had he been? Rabbi Eleazar said: He was taken up with his fasting and sackcloth (in repentance over his sin in violating his father's marital bed), and when he became free he went and looked into the pit... Rabbi Judah said: Every one of them attended his father one day, and that day it was Reuben's turn.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THEY TOOK JOSEPH'S COAT, AND KILLED A KID OF THE GOATS, AND DIPPED THE COAT IN THE BLOOD (37:31)

G-d pays back man measure for measure... even the righteous does He pay back measure for measure. Jacob deceived his father with goatskins (cf. Genesis 27:16), and his sons deceived him with the blood of a goat...

Likewise, Judah, who deceived his father with the blood of a goat, was

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Joseph, in the meantime, is taken to Egypt, where he is sold to Potiphar, a minister in Pharaoh's court.

Judah and Tamar

The saga of Joseph is interrupted to relate an incident in the life of Judah. Judah separates from his brothers, marries, and has three children: Er, Onan and Sheilah. When Er comes of age, Judah marries him to a woman by the name of Tamar.

Er "was wicked in the sight of G-d" and dies young. Judah tells Onan to perform "the duty of a brother-in-law" to marry the widow of a childless brother and "raise up progeny for your brother" (a practice called *yibbum*—cf. Deuteronomy 25:5). Onan, who does not desire to father children that will be regarded as his brother's, "spilled his seed to the ground." He, too, dies an early death in punishment for his sin..

Since Onan, too, had died childless, Sheilah was now supposed to marry Tamar. But time passes and Tamar realizes that Judah has no intention of marrying her to his third son. She resolves to find a way to have a child from Judah's family, if not from Sheilah, then from Judah himself.

And it was told to Tamar, saying, "Behold your father-in-law is going up to Timna to shear his sheep." And she put off her widow's garments, and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat by the crossroads which is by the way to Timna..

When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot,

Commentary

deceived by Tamar with a "kid of goats."

(Midrash; Rashi)

AND JACOB RENT HIS CLOTHES, AND PUT SACKCLOTH ON HIS LOINS, AND MOURNED FOR HIS SON MANY DAYS (37:34)

Why didn't G-d reveal to him the truth? Because when the brothers sold Joseph, they made a vow that none of them would tell their father of their deed, and they included G-d in their vow.

(Midrash; Rashi)

From here we learn that the Divine spirit does not rest upon one who is in a state of torpor, nor on one who is in a state of sorrow; this is why Jacob could not know the fate of Joseph.

(Lekach Tov)

AND HE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED (37:35)

One can be consoled over the dead, but not over the living... For regarding the dead it has been decreed that they be forgotten from the heart, but no such decree was decreed regarding the living.

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AT THAT TIME... (38:1)

The sons of Jacob were engaged in selling Joseph, Jacob was taken up with his sackcloth and fasting, and Judah was busy taking a wife, while the Holy One, blessed be He, was creating the light of Messiah. (Peretz, born of Judah and Tamar, is the ancestor of King David and the Messiah.)

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AT THAT TIME, THAT JUDAH WENT DOWN FROM HIS BROTHERS (38:1)

They took him down from his greatness when they saw their father's

agony. They said: You told us to sell him; if you would have told us to return him, we would have listened to you.

(Rashi)

ER, JUDAH'S FIRSTBORN, WAS WICKED IN THE SIGHT OF G-D; AND G-D SLEW HIM (38:7)

Er was guilty of the same sin as Onan, of spilling his seed, as it is written regarding Onan, "And G-d... slew him also" (38:10)—Onan's death was by the same cause as Er's. And why did Er spill his seed? So that Tamar should not become pregnant and ruin her beauty..

(Talmud; Rashi)

IT WAS TOLD TO TAMAR: BEHOLD, YOUR FATHER-IN-LAW IS GOING UP TO TIMNA TO SHEAR HIS SHEEP (38:13)

Yet in the case of Samson it says, "And Samson went *down* to Timna" (Judges 14:1). For Timna sat on the slope of a hill: one ascended to it from one side and descended to it from the other.

(Rashi)

The town of Timna is thus the prototype for all of life's destinations. One never simply goes to Timna—one either ascends or descends to it; the same is true of the journey of life. There are no two parallel points on the slope of human development, where every step is either a step up or a step down from its predecessor.

This is also the lesson implicit in the lights of Chanukah (which always falls in proximity with the Torah reading of *Vayeishev*). One who kindles a single flame on the first night of the festival observes the mitzvah of kindling the Chanukah lights in the most optimal manner possible. But to kindle that same flame on the following night is not only a failure to increase light but a decline in relation to yesterday's achievement: on the second night of Chanukah, a single flame represents a *less* than optimal observance of the mitzvah. For in the diagonal trajectory of life, our every deed and

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because she had covered her face. And he turned to her by the way, and said: "Come now, please, let me come in to you"; for he knew not that she was his daughter-in-law.

Judah promises her "a kid from the flock" in payment, but she insists that he leave "your signet, and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand" with her as a pledge until the payment is sent. Tamar becomes pregnant from him.

And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told to Judah, saying: "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by harlotry."

And Judah said: "Bring her out and let her be burnt."

When she was brought forth, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "By the man, whose these are, am I with child"; and she said: "Discern, I pray you, whose are these—the signet, and the cord, and the staff.""

Judah acknowledged them, and said: "She has been more righteous than I..."

Tamar gives birth to twins: Peretz ("bursting forth" because he pushed his way first out of the womb despite the fact that his brother's hand emerged first) and Zerach ("shining" because the midwife had tied a crimson thread on his hand to

mark him as the first born).

The Libel

Back to Joseph, who is rising in the ranks of the servants of Potiphar, his Egyptian master. "His master saw that G-d was with him, and that G-d made all that he did to prosper in his hand. And Joseph found favor in his sight.... and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand."

Potiphar's wife was attracted to the handsome, fortuitous youth.

And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, "Lie with me."

He refused, and said to his master's wife: "Behold, my master... has committed all that he has to my hand. There is none greater in this house than I; neither has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against G-d?"

Potiphar's wife persisted, and on one occasion, when no one else was home, she grabbed hold of his clothes. To get away from her, Joseph "left his garment in her hand, and fled, and went outside." She decides to avenge herself on him, and tells her husband that Joseph tried to force himself on her; "When I lifted up my voice and cried," she claimed, "he left his garment with me, and fled."

Joseph is thrown into the royal dungeon.

More Dreams

Joseph's charisma, enterprising spirit, and Divine blessing fol-

Commentary

endeavor either elevates or lowers us in relation to our prior station.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND SHE COVERED HERSELF WITH A VEIL, AND WRAPPED HERSELF (38:14)

Two women covered themselves with a veil and gave birth to twins: Rebecca and Tamar. Rebecca, as it is written, "And she took her veil, and covered herself" (Gen. 24:65); Tamar, as it is written, "And she covered herself with her veil, and wrapped herself."

(Midrash Rabbah)

WHEN JUDAH SAW HER, HE THOUGHT HER TO BE A HARLOT; BECAUSE SHE HAD COVERED HER FACE (38:15)

Because she had covered her face he thought her to be an harlot? But because she had covered her face in her father-in-law's house, he did not recognize her now.

Said Rabbi Samuel ben Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: Every daughter-in-law who is modest in her father-in-law's house merits that kings and prophets should issue from her. From where do we know this? From Tamar. Prophets issued from her, as it is written: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amotz"; and kings issued from her through David [who is descendent from Peretz].

(Talmud, Sotah 10b)

WHEN JUDAH SAW HER, HE THOUGHT HER TO BE A HARLOT... AND HE TURNED TO HER (38:15-16)

Said Ulla: Both Tamar and Zimri (cf. Numbers 25) committed harlotry. Tamar committed harlotry and gave birth to kings and prophets. Zimri committed harlotry and on his account many tens of thousands of Israel perished.

(Talmud, Nazir 23b)

Said Rabbi Jochanan: Judah wished to pass her by, but G-d sent the angel who is in charge of lust have his effect on him, saying to him: "Where are

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low him to prison. Before long,

the officer of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatever they did there, he was the doer of it.... because G-d was with him, and that which he did, G-d made it prosper.

Years pass. Then Pharaoh's chief butler and his chief baker, each of whom had committed some offence to their king, are thrown into the prison where Joseph was, and are entrusted to his care.

One morning, Joseph finds them in a troubled mood. They've both had dreams whose meaning they cannot fathom. "Do not interpretations belong to G-d?" says Joseph. "Tell me them."

The chief butler relates his dream:

Behold, a vine was before me. And on the vine were three tendrils; and it was as though it budded, and its blossoms shot forth; and its clusters brought forth ripe

grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand.

Joseph offers the following interpretation:

The three tendrils are three days. In another three days shall Pharaoh lift up your head, and restore you to your place; and you shall deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when you were his butler.

The chief baker, liking Joseph's interpretation of his colleague's dream, tells his own:

I also in my dream, behold, I had three baskets of white bread on my head. And in the uppermost basket there was of all manner of baked food for Pharaoh; and the birds did eat them out of the basket upon my head.

Which Joseph interprets:

The three baskets are three days. In another three days shall Pharaoh lift up your head from off you, and shall hang you on a tree; and the birds shall eat your flesh from off you.

Joseph has a favor to ask from the soon-to-be-freed butler:

Commentary

you going, Judah? Whence then are kings to arise, whence are redeemers to arise?" Thereupon, "And he turned to her"—despite himself and against his wish..

(Midrash Rabbah)

The Zohar points out that Moshiach (the Messiah) is the product of a number of morally dubious unions: Judah and Tamar; Boaz and Ruth; David and Batsheba.

AND HE SAID, "WHAT PLEDGE SHALL I GIVE YOU?" AND SHE SAID: "YOUR SIGNET, AND YOUR CORD, AND YOUR STAFF THAT IS IN YOUR HAND" (38:18)

A prophetic spirit was enkindled within her: "your signet" alludes to the royal house of David; "your cord" alludes to the Sanhedrin; "and your staff" alludes to the Messiah, as in the verse, "The staff of thy strength the L-rd will send out of Zion" (Psalms 110:2)—all of whom are the progeny of Judah and Tamar..

(Midrash Rabbah)

WHEN SHE WAS BROUGHT FORTH, SHE SENT TO HER FATHER IN LAW, SAYING: "BY THE MAN, WHOSE THESE ARE, AM I WITH CHILD" (38:25)

She did not wish to shame him by saying explicitly, "I am pregnant by you," only, "By the man, whose these are," saying to herself: "If he wishes to admit it, he will admit it himself; if not, they will burn me, but I will not shame him." From this our sages derived: One should cast himself into a fiery furnace rather than shame his fellow in public.

(Rashi; Talmud)

AND JOSEPH WAS BROUGHT DOWN TO EGYPT... (39:1)

Said Rabbi Tanchuma: This is comparable to a cow upon whom it was desired to place a yoke, but the cow was withholding her neck from the yoke. What did they do? They took her calf from behind her and drew him to the place where they wanted her to plow, and the calf was bleating. When the cow heard her calf bleating, she went despite herself, because of her child. By the same token, G-d wished to fulfil the decree (Genesis 15:13), "Know ye, [that your children will be strangers in a land that is not theirs]...", so he plotted all these events (of Joseph's sale to Egypt)..

(Midrash Tanchuma)

Jacob might have had to be brought down to Egypt in chains, but then G-d declared: "He is My firstborn son; shall I then bring him down in disgrace?" Now, if I provoke Pharaoh [with the intention to bring him down], I will not bring him down with befitting honor. Therefore I will draw his son before him, and so he will follow despite himself.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND JOSEPH WAS OF BEAUTIFUL FORM AND BEAUTIFUL APPEARANCE (39:6)

When he saw himself in a position of rulership, he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. Said G-d: "Your father is in mourning and you curl your hair! I shall incite the bear against you." Immediately, "His master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph..."

(Rashi)

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But think of me when it shall be well with you, and show kindness, I pray you, to me, and make mention of me to Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house.

For I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.

Three days later, Pharaoh celebrates his birthday, and remembers the two ministers he had ordered thrown in jail; he reinstates the chief butler and hangs the chief baker, "as Joseph had interpreted to them."

"The chief butler did not remember Joseph," concludes our Parshah, "but forgot him."

Commentary

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS, THAT HIS MASTER'S WIFE CAST HER EYES UPON JOSEPH (39:7)

Why does the Torah adjoin the incident of Potiphar's wife to the incident of Tamar? To tell us that just as Tamar acted for the sake of Heaven, so did Potiphar's wife act for the sake of Heaven. For she saw through her astrologers that she was destined to produce children from him. But she did not know whether through herself or through her daughter (Joseph married Potiphar's daughter, as per Genesis 41:45)

(Rashi)

AND SHE SAID: "LIE WITH ME." (39:7)

Said Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman said: Accursed are the wicked! In another passage [we find Ruth saying], "Spread therefore thy skirt over thy handmaid" (Ruth 3:9); but this one spoke like an animal: "Lie with me."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND HE REFUSED. AND HE SAID TO HIS MASTER'S WIFE: "...HOW THEN CAN I DO THIS GREAT WICKEDNESS, AND SIN AGAINST G-D?" (39:8-9)

Said Joseph to her: "I am afraid of the Holy One, blessed be He." Said she: "But He is not here"... She drove him from room to room and from chamber to chamber, until she brought him to her bed. Above it was engraved an idol, which she covered with a sheet. Said Joseph to her: "You have covered its face... How much then should you fear Him of whom it is written (Zechariah 4:10), "The eyes of the L-rd, that run to and fro through the whole earth"!"

A matron asked Rabbi Jose: "Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, with all the hot blood of youth, could act thus? [Surely the Torah is not telling us the whole truth!]" Thereupon he produced the Book of Genesis and read the stories of Reuben and Judah. "If Scripture did not suppress anything in the case of these, who were older and in their father's home, how much so in the case of Joseph, who was younger and his own master."

(Midrash Rabbah)

HOW THEN CAN I DO THIS GREAT WICKEDNESS, AND SIN AGAINST G-D?" (39:9)

Should not Joseph had said, "How then can we do this great wickedness, and sin against G-d"?"

But Joseph did not want to share in anything with her—not even the pronoun "we."

(Rabbi Bunim of Pshischa)

AND IT CAME TO PASS ABOUT THIS TIME, THAT JOSEPH WENT INTO THE HOUSE TO DO HIS WORK (39:11)

This means that he went to satisfy his desires [i.e., he was ready to succumb to Potiphar's wife]... At that moment his father's image came and appeared to him through the window and said: "Joseph, your brothers will have their names inscribed upon the stones of the *ephod*... Is it your wish to have your name expunged from amongst theirs and be called an associate of harlots?"

(Talmud, Sotah 36b)

WHEN HIS MASTER HEARD THE WORDS OF HIS WIFE, WHICH SHE SPOKE TO HIM, SAYING, "THESE THINGS DID YOUR SERVANT TO ME," HIS ANGER BURNED (39:19)

"These things"—she said this to him during intercourse..

(Rashi)

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS, THAT THE BUTLER OF THE KING OF EGYPT, AND HIS BAKER, OFFENDED THEIR LORD THE KING OF EGYPT (40:1)

A fly was found in the goblet prepared by the butler, and a pebble in the baker's confection.

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

AND THE CHIEF BUTLER DID NOT REMEMBER JOSEPH, BUT FORGOT HIM (40:23)

Because Joseph placed his trust in him, he had to remain imprisoned for another two years... Thus it says (Psalms 40:5): "Fortunate is the man who places his trust in G-d, and does not turn to the arrogant."

(Rashi)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

THE QUEST FOR PEACE

“Ignorance is bliss.” How facile — and how true! Are you sick to your soul of all the ugliness and injustice in the world? Just close your eyes, and make believe it ain’t so. And when reality barges in your door and comes crashing down on your head, close your eyes tighter, imagine harder. If you sing loud enough to drown out the sounds of carnage in the next street or continent, you can experience peace (or at least participate in a ceremony celebrating the same).

The opening verse of this week’s Torah reading, Vayeishev (Genesis 37-40), speaks of Jacob’s desire to “settle down in tranquility.” Anyone following the Torah’s account of Jacob’s life until this point cannot but agree that, after 34 years of fleeing from Esau and slaving for Laban, Jacob deserves some peace and quiet. But the very next verse begins the story of how, as the Talmud puts it, “there pounced on him the trouble of Joseph”: the most beloved of Jacob’s sons is sold into slavery by his own brothers and for 22 years Jacob grieves, thinking him dead; and the Jacob is compelled to spend the last years of his life far from home, in alien Egypt.

Why, indeed, was Jacob’s desire denied him? “When the righteous wish to settle in tranquility,” explain our sages, “G-d says: Is it not enough for them what is prepared for them in the World to Come, that they also ask for a tranquil life in this world?”

But why not? Does G-d have a limited quantity of tranquility to mete out? Why can’t we have the peace and perfection of the World to Come, and a few years of respite in this world as well?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the world to come is a world of truth. It is a world in which what happened yesterday and what will happen tomorrow cannot be divorced from what’s happening today, and what’s happening to your fellow man cannot be separated from what is happening to yourself. Peace in our still unperfected world, viewed from the perspective of the “World to Come”, is a lie.

Many are content to live this lie: to forget what happened yesterday, avoid thinking about what will happen tomorrow, ignore the sadness in a neighbor’s eye, the poverty on the other side of town and the bombs in the other time zone.

But then there are the righteous: men and women who cannot relish their meal as long as someone, somewhere, remains hungry; who, if there is ignorance in the world, know their own wisdom to be deficient; who, if there is discord anywhere in G-d’s creation, cannot be at peace with themselves.

Yes, you can have some peace in this world, and then experience the real thing in the World to Come—if you’re willing to let the World to Come come when it comes.

The righteous are not that patient. Their physical selves may be stuck in this world, but their minds and souls inhabit the world to come. They refuse to close their eyes.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com